THE FIRST TRUE GENTLEMAN

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Cover

THE FIRST TRUE GENTLEMAN

A Study in the Human
Nature of Our Lord

With a Foreword by
EDWARD EVERETT HALE, D.D.

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A FOREWORD

The dictionaries and the students of words have a great deal to say,--perhaps more than is worth while,--of the origin of the word Gentleman,--whether a gentleman in England and a *gentilhomme* in France mean the same thing, and so on. The really interesting thing is that in a republic where a man's a man, the gentleman is not created by dictionaries or by laws. You cannot make him by parchment.

As matter of philology, the original gentleman was *gentilis*. That is, he belonged to a *gens* or clan or family, which was established in Roman history. He was somebody. If he had been nobody he would have had no name. Indeed, it is worth observing that this was the condition found among the islanders of the

South Sea. Exactly as on a great farm the distinguished sheep, when they were sent to a cattle fair might have specific names, while for the great flock nobody pretends to name the individuals, so certain people, even in feudal times, were *gentilis*, or belonged to a *gens*, while the great body of men were dignified by no such privilege.

The word gentleman, however, has bravely won for itself, as Christian civilisation has gone on, a much nobler meaning.

The reader of this little book will see that the poet Dekker, surrounded by the gentlemen of Queen Elizabeth's Court, already comprehended the larger sense of this great word. The writer of this essay, taking the familiar language of the Established Church of England, follows out in some of the great crises of the Saviour's life some of the noblest illustrations of the poet's phrase.

It is well worth remembering that the Received Version of the New Testament, which belongs to Dekker's own generation, accepts his noble use of language in one of the great central passages. In the very little which we know of the early arrangements of apostleship, we are given to understand that the Apostle James lived at Jerusalem, and that in what he wrote he addressed the Christians of every race and habit in all parts of that world of which Jerusalem is the centre. The Epistle of James may be called the first encyclical addressed to all sorts and conditions of men who accepted Jesus of Nazareth as the leader of their lives. To this day its practical and straightforward simplicity challenges the admiration of all those believers who know that the tree is to be judged by its fruits,--that it is not enough to cry "Lord, Lord,"--that it is not enough to say, "I believe in this" or "I believe in that";--but rather that the follower of Christ must do what He says. And how does this gentle apostle of apostles define in word the "wisdom which is from above?" The wisdom from above is first pure, as the Master had said, "Blessed are the pure in heart." Then the Wisdom from above is peaceable, as the angels said when He was born. Then the wisdom from above is gentle. The man who follows Christ is a gentle man. The woman who follows Christ is a gentle woman.

And if anyone eager for accuracy in the use of language choose to hunt the Greek word which we find in St. James's Epistle through the lexicons, he learns that the gentleman whom St. James knew is he who in dealing with others "abates something from his absolute right." He is so large and unselfish that he can grant more than he is compelled to grant by rigorous justice. He is the man who can love his brothers better than himself. These are phrases from the old dictionaries.

"Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends."

EDWARD E. HALE.

The First True Gentleman

The Elizabethan poet Dekker said of our Lord that He was "the first true gentleman that ever breathed." The passage is worth quotation:--

> "Patience! why, 'tis the soul of peace,
> Of all the virtues nearest kin to Heaven.
> It makes men look like gods, the best of men
> That e'er wore earth about him was a sufferer--
> A soft, meek, patient, humble, tranquil spirit,
> The first true gentleman that ever breathed."

All through English literature the word "gentleman" has had two meanings, and has been used to describe a man of certain qualities as well as a man of a certain birth. A hundred and fifty years before Dekker wrote it was declared that "truth, pity, freedom, and hardiness" were the essential qualities of a gentleman. Our Lord in His human nature personified these things. Every gentleman in Christendom derives his ideal from Christ whatever may be his dogmatic creed. No virtue, perhaps, was so characteristic of our Lord as His devotion to truth. He declared before Pilate that it was the end for which He was born. He condemned all those who hindered its diffusion and tried to make it the monopoly of a caste. He tabooed all absurd asseverations, the occasional use of which was but a confession of habitual lying. He taught that lies were of the Devil, and that it was the Holy Spirit who led men into all truth. He said that sincerity was the great light of the Spirit, that all double-minded men were in the dark, and that their fear of the light of day was their own sufficient condemnation. The ideal gentleman all through the ages has conformed his conduct in the matter of truth to the Christian standard. He has avoided mental reservation, abhorred lying, and, though he has garnished his speech with oaths, his yea has meant yea, and his nay, nay, and he has regarded his word as his bond.

Again, courage and pity were combined in the character of Christ as they had never been combined before. Now the combination is common enough. We have the seed and can grow the flower; but every man who excels in both is in some sense a follower of Christ. The courage of our Lord, though it included physical courage, was not of that calibre which is more properly called animal,--animal courage implies a want of imagination, and is probably incompatible with pity. Christ in the garden of Gethsemane "tasted death for every man," and held

out a hand of sympathy to that vast majority who must for ever regard it with strong dread. Yet by His precepts, by His life, and by His death He taught men that fear can be mastered, though it is a form of suffering seldom altogether spared to the highest type of man.

Apart from their religious significance, the trial and crucifixion of Christ form the scene in the world's history of which humanity has most reason to be proud. Christ, in His human nature, was a Galilean peasant. He excused to his face the Roman Governor who stooped to threaten a prisoner in Whom he found no fault. Judge and prisoner changed places. The distinctions of the world dissolved before the distinctions of God. At Pilate's bar all gentlemen recognise their hero, an example for ever of the powerlessness of circumstances to humiliate.

On the Cross not only did our Lord maintain that composure which witnesses to the supreme power of the soul, but with still balanced judgment He refused to impute sin to the Roman conscripts whose orders were to crucify. He made a last effort to console the grief of His mother and His friend, and set Himself to give hope and encouragement to the suffering thief who believed he was receiving the due reward of his deeds. A genius however great, a gentleman however perfect, could imagine no story of courage more noble or more inspiring than the one set down in the Gospels.

A new pity came into the world with Christ. The lump is not yet leavened; even the white race is not yet pitiful. All the same, the emotion of pity is a power, and does, broadly speaking, distinguish Christendom from the heathen world. It is part of the ideal of all those who are conscious of having an ideal at all. Gusts of anger, both national and individual, sweep it out of sight; it is paralysed by fear, rendered blind by use and wont; again and again its scope is narrowed by the reaction which follows upon affectations and exaggerations; but it is never killed. It has been part of the moral equipment of a gentleman since Christ "went about doing good," revealing to men the secret Nature could not teach them--breaking, as it seemed to them, the uniformity of her relentlessness--the secret of the divine compassion.

The independence of mind and manner inculcated by our Lord still marks a gentleman to-day. Did He not teach that a man's conduct must at all times be ruled by his code and not regulated by his company? He must maintain the same attitude towards life whether he find himself among just or unjust, friends or enemies. He must not salute his brethren only, nor be only kind to those that love him. He must remain an honest man among thieves, ready to rebuke an offender to his face, but still a gentleman, who does not "revile again" or suffer the passion of revenge to destroy his judgment. This moral independence is the rock on which character is built. The man whose actions depend upon his environment has but a sandy foundation to his moral nature. Upon this strong rock of moral indepen-

dence rest also the best manners. Self-assertion and self-distrust are singularly allied. It is the ill-assured who push in their ardent desire to be like somebody else. It is dignity rather than humility which is recommended to us in the parable of those who chose the chief seats at feasts. It is a common thing to hear it said by simple people in praise of some one they regard as pre-eminently a gentleman that "he is always the same." No doubt the publicans and sinners whose friendly advances Christ accepted without apparent condescension said this of Him. He was so entirely Himself among them that the vulgar-minded Pharisees whispered to one another that He must be ignorant of the sort of company He was in, or surely He would make plain the gulf fixed between Himself and them. By conventionality our Lord seems never to have been bound. On the other hand, He did not wantonly overthrow the conventions of His day. When a social custom struck Him as injurious, He told those who gave in to it that it stood in the way of better things, substituting custom for conscience. On the other hand, He fell in with the usual ways of respectable people in a great many particulars, praying in a village place of worship beside Pharisees who stood up to bless themselves and publicans who dared not so much as lift their eyes to heaven, taking part in a service which was far enough removed from the sincere, spiritual, and wholly unsuperstitious worship to which He looked forward as He talked beside the well.

Christ had a horror of tyranny in every form, and He seems to have regarded it as a peculiarly heathen vice. "The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them," He said. Some bold translators emphasise His meaning by saying "lord it" over them. Dekker was right. A true gentleman is not harsh, implacable, or capricious. The breaking of other men's wills gives him no pleasure. Christ's followers, He said, must avoid all selfish wish for ascendency. A ruler, He said, should regard himself as the servant of all. Where ruling is concerned the counsels of Christ seem, like all His most characteristic utterances, to be calculated rather to inspire aspiration in the minds of good men than definitely to regulate their action, for in more than one of the parables His words imply that an ambition to rule is a lawful ambition, and that increased responsibility may be looked to as a reward.

Theoretically the Christian attitude towards power has always been the gentlemanlike attitude. Hall, the chronicler, writing in 1548, says in the "Chronicles of Henry VI.": "In this matter Lord Clyfford was accounted a tyrant, and no gentleman."

It is commonly said to-day that Christianity has never been tried. Such a judgment is superficial in the extreme. The moral teaching of Christ has never been entirely carried out by any community nor perhaps by any man, but to speak as though it had no great influence is sheer affectation. The white people have wasted, it is true, their time and their blood in quarrelling about dogma;

but every Christian sect has recognised in the divine character of the Nazarene Carpenter who suffered upon the Cross the perfectibility of the human race, and in their highest moments of aspiration and repentance peoples and rulers alike have pleaded His merits before God. Nothing but this recognition could have curbed the cruel pride of the ancient world, have undermined the barriers of race and caste with a sense of human brotherhood, have cast at least a suspicion upon the theory that might is right, and made respect for women a necessary part of every good man's creed. Entirely apart from what is usually called religion in England to-day, "truth, pity, freedom, and hardiness" are the ideals of the race because nineteen hundred years ago Christ was born in the stable of a Jewish inn.

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